

No quick fix in sight for the CIA

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The sudden, albeit not totally unexpected resignation of Director of Central Intelligence R. James Woolsey has once again drawn public attention to the miserable state of affairs inside America's once-vaunted Central Intelligence Agency. And the fact that two front-runners to replace Woolsey—Deputy Defense Secretary John Deutch and U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James Adm. William Crowe—ran their own public relations campaigns to convince President Clinton that they are genuinely not interested in the job, has only made matters worse.

Last year, the CIA was beset by three major scandals:

1) Aldrich "Rick" Ames, a career case officer in the CIA Directorate of Operations (DDO), was arrested on charges that he spied for the Soviet Union and Russia for nearly a decade. Ames tipped the KGB to the identities of nearly every U.S. intelligence asset inside Moscow's military, political, and intelligence structures, and turned over so many secret U.S. intelligence files that the KGB eventually wound up facing a shortage of skilled English-language translators.

2) Congress discovered—after the fact—that the CIA was building a vast new covert facility in Northern Virginia to house the National Reconnaissance Office, one of the agency's last remaining high-tech spy programs. The three-building "luxury" complex adjacent to Dulles Airport near Washington, was concealed from congressional oversight panels. For years, the \$360 million allocated for the compound was buried in a string of budget lines.

3) A female CIA case officer in the DDO sued the agency for sexual discrimination after she was denied a promotion to station chief in Czechoslovakia, and eventually was driven out of the CIA for alleged "lewd" behavior. The woman, identified in court papers as "Jane Doe Thompson," recently won a large out-of-court settlement from the CIA. The charges of sexual bias at the agency, like the Ames affair, are still simmering. A class-action suit by a large number of female CIA employees also appears close to an out-of-court settlement.

As bad a light as these scandals cast over Langley, they barely begin to hint at the depth of the problem that the new director will be facing. On the basis of discussions with a number of current and former intelligence officers, congressional staffers, and agency-watchers, a picture emerges of a CIA demoralized to the core, desperate to define a mission in the vastly more complex "post-Cold War world," and still

stuck with a well-deserved legacy of corruption that may prove to be the hardest thing of all to shake.

One of the more visible casualties of this "battle for the soul" of the CIA was Woolsey. In the wake of the November GOP electoral victories, President Clinton was anxious to repair his image as a take-charge leader, and he turned to Woolsey to dispense fair but harsh punishment to the senior CIA officers responsible for bungling the Ames probe. Woolsey refused to censure his top spooks and then turned around and cashiered several people out of the agency for a relatively minor, unrelated indiscretion.

Woolsey had earlier managed to thoroughly alienate every congressman and senator responsible for CIA oversight, so when he failed to carry out the President's wishes, his days were numbered.

Corruption

On the most rudimentary level, the CIA is suffering from a chronic, perhaps incurable case of corruption. And it didn't start with William Casey.

One former senior agency administrator traced part of this corruption back to the Vietnam War era, when the CIA conducted a \$1 million-a-day "secret war" in Laos on an official budget that never exceeded \$30 million a year. Most of that war was bankrolled, the former official explained, by profit-generating activities of agency proprietaries like Air America. What kind of profit-making activities? Drug and arms trafficking!

Some of the key players in those alleged activities—typified by Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord (ret.) and former Laos station chief Theodore G. Shackley—resurfaced in the 1980s as pivotal figures in the George Bush-led secret parallel government which ran the covert wars in Central America, Angola, and Afghanistan.

And over at the Directorate of Intelligence, things are apparently not much better. Ever since President Lyndon Johnson rebuked Richard Helms for giving him "bad news" about the war in Vietnam, CIA analysis has been plagued by politicization. "Tell the President what he wants to hear—not what he needs to know!" became the guiding doctrine, according to former CIA officers.

Things got so bad inside the Directorate that a few years back, there was a brief but highly publicized revolt by mid-level analysts when one of the worst of the "political spin doctors," Robert Gates, was nominated by President Bush to head the CIA after Casey's death. Melvin Goodman and several other respected analysts delivered public testimony against Gates's nomination, and Senate Intelligence panel sources report that the office was flooded with visits and correspondence from CIA active duty employees desperate to trash the Gates nomination.

None of these problems has been tackled and, by several accounts, the corruption, demoralization, and "political spin doctoring" is now worse than ever.